

Chapter 1

The moon hung low and fat in the sky. In the East, the clouds emerged slowly as the first rays of the invisible sun skimmed across their surface. The world sat still. Caught in between the night's passing and the day's birth, life lost its sharp edges. It softened like the clouds, like the soothing shine of the sinking moon. It threatened to just drift apart. Nikola ached to stop the car. Out there, among the trees and the smells of the earth, there would be peace. For a few fleeting moments or forever. He could rest his head on the moss and pine, bathe his face in the morning dew, lay still until his bones turned to dust. He could be nothing. A root, a stone, a leaf drifting on the wind. The poorest dirt in which only the weeds grew. He could die and live, or die and never live again.

He didn't stop. With numb fingers, he drew another cigarette from the pack. Two towns back Anne slept under his grandmother's quilts, wrapped up in all the love he had to give. The scent of her, chamomile and pear, forever woven into his world. The copper hair spread over the blue pillowcase, one bare leg drawn up to her chest, on guard even in her dreams. There had been a rare peace under those quilts, a different sort of peace that was both reassuring and bitter at once. He wished he could hide there now.

Some days were harder than others. Some mornings hurt. A million needles scraping his skin, his chest tight and quivering, reality holding on by the barest thread. He was slipping. He was slipping but it would pass, and he would survive it as he always did. Not for the life itself which was a burden rather than a gift, and not for Anne either, as much as he owed it to her. He would survive it for punishment's sake; it was his cross, his crown. He would bear it until it broke him.

He left the nightmares in the car. Gray dawn settled on his shoulders, hurrying his steps. Under the cold, artificial fluorescents, the reality solidified. The tightness in his chest eased. Now he could search for a crumb of peace, in a place that did not call him to darkness.

The time clock flashed as he walked by; it was too early to start the day. Past the gray bins and their overpowering reek of stale urine, past the hum of the vending machines, past the chipped tables stained with old food. Out the sliding door and on to the drive. The earth fell off there, crumbled away into the sand and the sea, gave in to forces greater than itself. An expanse of blue like glass, nothing but a pale gray line separating the heavens from the water. Salt burned his nostrils. A lone seagull shrieked far above him, laying claim to all below it.

Sliding down the brick wall, he settled on his heels. To the left, a crooked finger of the pier cut a ragged line through the blue. To his right the fog rolled past a bare island, obscuring the arches of an old, stone bridge. Cool breeze slid across his cheek and he shivered despite the warmth of the morning.

Anne's alarm would be sounding right now. One of her arms would shoot from under the quilts and smack it viciously. She would groan but rise none the less, never once hesitating to abandon the warmth of the bed. Her small feet would not shy away from the cold, uneven floors. She would brush her teeth with icy water and apply her make up in front of a cracked mirror. Out of a dusty, moldy attic she would emerge, hair blazing in the sun, shoulders set for a battle. The empty fridge, the wind howling through the eaves, the paint peeling in the hall; fine

wrinkles forming in the corners of her eyes, handfuls of hair filling up her brush, the last summer's dress hanging from her frame. Aging in front of him. Years spent holding him together, gluing the pieces back, feeding her strength into an empty vessel. How much longer?

"Early again?"

Nikola slid his card wordlessly. The reality might be solid now but he was not. Not today. Thick bile churned in the back of his throat and no amount of swallowing would make it go down. Liz slid her card as he turned away; she hadn't expected an answer. Most days he didn't give one. Today he couldn't.

The service elevator creaked to the fourth floor. In a windowless hallway, he grabbed an apron off a peg and tied it around his waist. The heat of the kitchen hit him with force, sweat instantly emerging from every pore, his lungs fighting to process the moist air. No one looked at him and he looked at no one. In the far right corner, a hill of pots and pans waited, crusted over with the last night's supper. The water scorched his hands and he let it. Nothing was real except for the pain anyway.

He ate mechanically until the clock showed that a half of his break had passed. The leftovers were dumped in the trash bin. Most days he didn't notice what he ate or how much he threw away, but he ate every day. Anne had asked him to. It was such a small thing to ask.

Then back out through the sliding door and into the sunshine. A squirrel jumped when he appeared, nose twitching, bushy tail shivering in fear. It bolted past him, over the rocks and up the shed wall. It paused at the top to glance back at him, the pebble eyes shining. Then it was gone.

"You scared it."

Anyone else would have jumped. Nikola froze, his skin tightening as it grew too small to contain him. His breath locked in his lungs, every muscle straining, teeth locking together until a spike of pain shot through his jaw. It lasted moments only but for him, years passed. Fresh sweat coated him, his heart beat echoed in his throat, his knees trembled. He fought his body, fought himself. No coherent thoughts formed as he struggled to breathe, to loosen his jaw, to convince millions of nerve endings that he was in control.

"Are you ok?"

Impotent fury spiked. He turned slowly, every movement feeling exaggerated in his own mind, the air around him still shimmering. Everyone in the building knew. The word had spread quickly after the last time someone had inadvertently startled him. As if he wasn't strange enough; as if the people hadn't been whispering already. He was pathetic; they knew it and he knew it. At least he could ignore it most of the time. As long as no one snuck up on him like this.

Blue eyes. An ocean contained, wrestled into a space too small for its strength. Had its surface ever looked so calm, so peaceful? Perhaps before the first man walked the earth, when the world was still unblemished. Something in his chest stuttered and the fury bled through it, slipping away even as he tried to grasp it. He looked away.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

On unsteady legs, Nikola made his way to the rocks and settled against the closest one. His throat still pulsed, his skin prickled. He pulled the cigarette pack out of his pocket. Over the noise of the gulls and the waves, he could hear another breath, deeper than his own, soothing and regular. Heat rose in his face. A gaze was brushing his cheek, his neck.

He lit a cigarette. The sliding door whispered open and closed just as softly. He was alone again.

He slept a lot. During the day, the dreams were safe. As safe as they can be.

He dreamt in colors. The reds and the yellows of wild flames, the deep greens and purples of bruises, thick maroons of crusted blood. Wrapped in a tight ball, he clutched himself through the deepest sleep and every waking would reveal fresh finger marks staining his flesh.

At night, only the scent of chamomile and pear could unclench his hands. Forehead pressed against a warm shoulder, he was safe. Her palm on his hip, her hair mixing with his own. Anne was a bare cold stone in a stormy sea. It was just there, as eternal as the universe, stark and beautiful, providing a foothold every time he slipped. She could not feel him drowning just like she could not feel his grip wearing her away.

In the daylight he slept by the window. The rusty cot creaked every time he moved. Sun burned his eyelids, burned away the colors and he drifted, dreaming of nothing.

Hours passed. He heard her come in, drop her bag in the hallway. The bathroom door creaked, the toilet flushed, the water splashed into the sink. A short silence ensued. He could picture her standing at the cracked mirror, staring blankly but not seeing, lost in some world that they had never shared. He was awake now, a silent statue with its eyes closed, waiting. Her shoes clattered against the bathroom wall. Her bare feet made no sound but he heard the swish of her polyester dress, the click of her right knee. Her hand touched his cheek.

Eyes still shut, he pressed his lips against the palm. An urge overtook him to take her hand and press it against his chest, to ask her to lie down with him, to tell her that the world shivered and shook, that it spasmed like a dying thing and that he was afraid. But her hand was already pulling back.

“Are you hungry?”

The sun lit her hair on fire. This morning’s make up lay heavy on her face, smudged the corners of her eyes. Faint lines marred the forehead that had been unblemished when they first met.

He wasn’t hungry but he nodded anyway.

“Pizza ok?”

He nodded again, not trusting his words. She would ask anyway because she knew him. She knew everything and understood nothing and he could never hold it against her.

“Are you all right?”

Just like he knew she would ask, they both knew what his answer would be.

“Fine. Just tired.”

He woke up in the middle of a silent scream, his face contorted into a rictus of pain, every muscle so tight that cramps were already tightening in his calves. He smelled burnt flesh, felt the spattered blood trickle down his back,

tasted copper and gravel and tears. The cramps seized his legs. Shoving one clenched fist in his mouth, he bit down hard enough to break the skin. His eyes locked on a ridge of a pale spine, rising and falling slowly. Breathe. He had to breathe. His muscles twisted until the bones shrieked. Breathe.

The first lungful of air scorched and ripped its way through. Then he was gasping around the fist, tears of exertion and pain collecting unnoticed under his face. It was over. He'd known it was coming but now it was over. There was only pain left.

He limped across the parking lot. Thick silence weighed the world down, the air charged and still. In the lobby, a relic from another time huddled in a wheelchair. Milky eyes rose up to his from under a brim of a dusty porkpie hat, "Mary? Is that you Mary?"

Nikola paused. Mary was dead. Everyone was dead here and no one knew it yet. Swollen, gnarled fingers gripped the cane tighter, a plain wedding band sunk into the flesh, "Mary? I'm ready to go home."

The first flash of lightening illuminated them both. Thunder rolled in the distance. The wrinkled skin rearranged, a ghost of a smile deepening the lines, "A storm is coming. Will you dance in the rain with me?"

"John!"

An Aide came rushing around the corner, her face glistening with sweat. Nikola could smell it, sour and fearful. He took a step back.

"Oh, you found him, thank you, thank you! John, you had me worried sick! Where are you going?"

Two more flashes came. The thunder exploded, the windows rattled in protest, the lights flickered. In the moments of silence that followed, Nikola could hear the thrum of rain approaching.

The blank gaze held him in place, "I'm going home."

The sky opened up.

The fluorescents flickered again. One of the vending machines hissed in protest and its lights went out. Nikola paused in front of the sliding door. Beyond it the world had ceased to exist, as if the seas had rose up to drown it once and for all. Would he still exist out there? Or would he become the storm, lashing out with fury then dissipating silently? He stepped out and was drenched in moments.

A figure stood at the edge of the earth.

Arms spread, head tipped back, a river flowing down the smooth throat, a willing Jesus on the invisible cross, face turned to Heavens. Laughter echoed, mixing with the thunder. It struck the building, struck Nikola somewhere deep inside of his chest, then escaped down the slope. The figure turned to him, arms still spread as if to encompass the storm; a flash of white teeth and blue eyes, incomprehensible joy radiating, pulsing through the space between them. Amber hair coiled along the sharp edge of the jaw, lay heavy on the slick temples. White scrub top molded to shoulders, arms, stomach. Open hands cupped small lakes, waterfalls pouring through the fingers.

Something hot and sweet tightened in Nikola's stomach, a vaguely familiar feeling emerging from some dirty, cobwebbed corner. It traveled like the wind to his fingertips and toes, shot flames to his face, to his groin. Delight,

strange and strong, tugged at his mouth. Blue eyes shining in pleasure latched on to his. One hand extended, palm still open, wordlessly asking him to step out, to join in the dance.

He could see himself closing the gap, curving his fingers around the unknown skin, feeling its coolness against his own. Letting the rain flow over the joined hands, sealing them together. Then he saw more, a fragmented jumble of blue and white, amber hair wrapped around his wrist, a rain-slicked bottom lip tasting of salt and wind. Biting down on his tongue, he turned away from the outstretched hand and stumbled back inside.

Over and over again he slid the time card through the slot. Finally, Liz cleared her throat behind him, “It won’t work if it’s wet.”

As he walked away, he heard another female voice drift behind him, “Did you see the new guy? What the hell was he doing out there?”

The time clock beeped. Just before the elevator doors closed, he heard Liz chuckle, “Toby? I guess he-“ Then the doors shut and Nikola was jerked up. Leaning his forehead on the metal, he took a deep, shuddering breath.

His whisper was lost in the grind of the gears, “God help me.”

He sought escape in Anne and she let him. White thighs parting in the gloom, eyes closed, one arm wrapped around him, the other flung out, reaching for something that wasn’t there. She gasped at first then stayed silent as always, her warmth and her breath all she’d ever known how to give. He took it anyway. It used to be enough. Except that now, a flash of blue and white crept up unnoticed. Skin slicked by rain, laughter echoing. He shuddered above her. In the weak moonlight, the copper strands had turned amber. It was over before it started. She released him, her sigh neither relieved nor disappointed.

Still, he shrank away, “Sorry.”

Her hand settled on his hip, “It’s ok. I’m tired anyway.”

In the windowless bathroom he stared at his reflection. A stranger stared back, gray eyes hooded, deep shadows painted underneath with the unskilled brush of insomnia. Sharp cheekbones, sharp nose, lips pressed together tightly. Shoulder length hair tangled, streaks of white marring the brown.

He moved back, the reflection now encompassing the rest. Bones jutted out and created hollows, skin stretched over hips and collarbones, puckered scars cut across the stomach, across the chest, across the neck. Turning around, he watched them streak across his back.

Trembling, he shut the light off. Under the quilts, he pressed his forehead against the warm, smooth shoulder. Her lips brushed the top of his head.

Chapter 2

Toby carefully unwrapped his back brace and tucked it in the locker. Then he peeled off the lidocaine patches from his lower back and the right shoulder.

"Damn honey, you got anything else? A morphine patch?"

He smiled, "I wish. Some days I could definitely use one."

Julie huffed. Her gait belt and name tag clattered to the bottom of the locker, "Like today?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the flash of her scrub top coming off. Twisting slightly, he put his back to her and dumped the used patches in the trash. She wore a tank top under her scrub top; most of the girls did. What most of them didn't do was undress in the locker room in front of the male Aides. But she'd singled him out from the day one. Small things: pairing up with him on the mechanical transfers, taking the same lunch break, always standing so close that he could smell her, a mix of rose and lavender. Eventually, she would step up her game when he didn't. He would tell her he wasn't interested and lose a good work partner. It happened all the time and it was becoming depressing.

"Get anything done yet? Probably not, right? Otherwise you wouldn't need all the braces and patches."

He had two more patches on his knees. Ordinarily, he would never put on so many. But they'd worked an Aide short two days in the row and he was feeling the strain. He wouldn't take them off in front of her.

"No, nothing done. Never had stable insurance long enough to find out what needs to be done."

"You're lucky," she said, an undertone of self-importance creeping in, "Had my shoulder done two years ago. Out of work for three months. Luckily I'd signed up for the short-term disability, otherwise I would've lost my car. Now they're telling me I need injections in my knees. Perks of the job, huh?"

"It could be worse."

"True. You know Carrie, up on the second floor? Worked as an Aide for twenty-seven years. Can you imagine? Twenty-seven years. The disks in her back are pretty much disintegrating."

Toby didn't know what to say to that. He turned back to his locker and could see her again, still in her tank top, digging through her purse. She was pretty. He could admit that. Small, regular features, chestnut hair, heavily lashed brown eyes. But there was something about the set of her mouth, something vaguely unpleasant which only showed when she was distracted. Whatever it was didn't sit well with him.

The door slammed behind them and Liz stormed in.

"I'm so sick of this shit! Since when has it become acceptable for the supervisor to not find coverage?"

Her locker door bounced off the wall and rebounded. She smacked it again. Julie suddenly became fully engrossed in the contents of her purse. Toby snatched his jacket and keys off the hook.

"Thanks for your help," he said, "both of you. I could've never found my way around alone."

Julie beamed at him. Liz sighed and shook her head, "I'm so fucking tired. I swear, some days I wish someone would hit me with their car so I can go out on disability permanently."

"Hey," he said, "what did you tell me my first day on?"

Liz emptied her pockets into the locker. Gloves, creams, sanitizers and pens joined the already impressive mess on the bottom, "That you'd be better off working at Dunkin Donuts?"

Toby grinned, "Well, that too. But you said that I can only do what I can do. Remember? You've only got two hands. What doesn't get done, doesn't get done. You told me to relax."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I just wanna go home and drink a bottle of wine. Maybe two."

"Oh! We should all do that!" Julie chimed in, "There's that place down the street, the Blue Lounge? We should stop there on the way home, the three of us."

Liz shook her head, "I gotta get out of these sneakers. I don't think I'll be able to put them back on for at least twenty-four hours."

Julie made a sad face that just missed being genuine.

"Toby," she turned to him quickly, "You wanna go?"

"I don't drink."

"I don't really drink either, just once in a while. If today isn't the right day to have a glass of wine, I don't know when is."

"No, I mean I don't drink. Ever."

"Oh," her eyes widened slightly.

He shouldered his backpack, "Ok guys, I'll see you next time."

He climbed into his truck and sighed. All the muscles and tendons in his back seemed to settle down at once; all except for the ones in his right shoulder. Those still screamed. It felt so wonderful to finally sit down though, that he turned the truck on and then just stared out over the marsh. To his left, just past the building wall, he could see the ocean glittering in the sun. There was a stone bridge back there somewhere, connecting the mainland to a small island. One of these days he'd go searching for it but today he was just too tired. He had a decent half an hour ride ahead of him and the truck was leaking steering fluid again. More strain on his shoulder. But that was ok. It was a beautiful day, the birds were singing, he had his first paycheck in his pocket and the best of all, tonight he got to celebrate. One full year clean, no relapse. He fingered the yellow key tag hanging from the ignition. Tonight he would replace it with a glow-in-the-dark one.

The loading dock door moved in his review mirror. A trash bin emerged, then a man pushing it. Feeling his heart beat speed up, Toby carefully twisted in the seat. It was him. The kitchen guy.

Toby watched him push the bin to the dumpster, slide the door open and throw the bags in. Then he pushed the bin back up the ramp and disappeared inside the building.

The entire process took maybe two minutes but Toby was left feeling like a jittery teenager. Everything about the guy fascinated him. He'd meant to ask Liz about him but never got a chance to. He definitely didn't want to ask in front of Julie.

That first time they met, at the lunch break, Toby was sure that there was something seriously wrong with the guy. Something about his frame, the way his body tensed, that instant when his eyes looked almost inhuman. For a split second Toby had been afraid. He'd encountered anger before, from people he knew and strangers alike, but never the kind of anger he'd seen that day. It seemed almost desperate; an anger of a cornered beast with a hair thin trigger.

Toby had apologized but that wasn't what made the anger go away. He was almost sure of it. It was the moment when their eyes met. Toby had had the most dizzying sense of déjà vu, where everything, from the screech of the sea gulls to the deep gray of the guy's shirt seemed so familiar, as if it had happened a million times before and would happen a million times more.

It left him confused and disoriented.

He'd had no intention of finding himself alone with the guy after that. And he wouldn't have, except for the storm. Toby had always loved storms; even as a kid, he would rush outside and dance in the high wind, every strike of the lightening, every roll of the thunder making him feel invincible. That particular storm was his favorite kind. It built slowly, teasingly, the pressure in the air increasing until every hair on his body stood up. When it finally broke, it felt like a crack in the fabric of time. He was outside, soaked to the skin, laughing like a lunatic and suddenly, the guy was there. Standing by the door in the rain, watching him.

The look in his eyes. Toby shivered, feeling his body tingle at the memory. No one had ever looked at him like that. As if Toby was something unearthly, something divine. The face that had looked so threatening last time had transformed in front of him, every sharp line softening, the lips that had seemed too thin hovering on the verge of a smile.

Standing there in the rain, relaxed, those odd streaks of white in his hair stuck to his cheekbones, he'd been beautiful, and Toby had wanted him. He'd reached out to this stranger without a thought, knowing that the moment their hands touched he would give him everything. Right there in the rain, regardless of who was watching, regardless of consequences. It was insanity. He knew that now. The guy had turned around and walked away. It was a good thing. Toby had always been impulsive, acting before thinking, willing to try anything as long as it felt right. It took him a long time to learn that just because something felt right, it didn't mean that it was necessarily good for him. The last eight years of his life were full of those lessons. Unfortunately for him, he was also a slow learner. Seven years of drug use to figure out that his life had spun out of control. Five years in a relationship with a man who lied and cheated before Toby figured out that there was no love there, just a sick, codependent relationship where all he did was give and all Michael did was take.

Life was finally good. He didn't need complications.

"Honey, I'm home!"

Dropping his keys and backpack on the kitchen table he made a face at the sink. It had obviously not been touched since the night before when he'd filled it with soap and hot water. The microwave beeped, announcing that it was done doing whatever it was supposed to be doing. It sounded disgruntled and Toby agreed with it. A half eaten sandwich sat on the counter.

"Oh good!" came a shout from the living room, "You're home! I need help."

He kicked off his shoes, "You lose your glasses again?"

"Ha, ha!"

Becky came around the corner full speed as always. Toby was glad to see that she was wearing her glasses. He hated looking for the damn things; last time he'd found them in the dryer.

“I think they screwed me! Look at this!” she thrust her pay stub in his face, “It says I worked thirty-two hours! I worked forty, I always work forty!”

The microwave beeped again and he sighed, “You have food in the microwave. Here, give me the freaking stub and get your food out.”

“I hate that place,” she went on, having to get up on her tip toes to reach the plate in the microwave, “and I hate this kitchen. You were gonna move this thing to the counter for me, remember?”

An obnoxious stench of a breakfast burrito wafted out of the microwave.

Toby settled at the kitchen table with the pay stub, “You said you were gonna do the dishes.”

“I will! I just haven’t had a chance yet.”

She sat down in front of him and dug into the burrito with a fork and a knife.

There was nothing to her; a hundred and five pounds at most, just over five foot two. Sandy hair that was wispy and thin. Tilted eyes and startlingly high cheekbones. He loved her but she drove him insane.

“You worked a holiday last week. It’s thirty two hours of regular pay plus eight hours of holiday pay. See, it’s right at the bottom of the check,” he pushed it towards her.

“Oh,” she picked it up and squinted at it despite the glasses. He didn’t dare say anything. He’d suggested she might need new glasses once and she’d ripped his head off.

“I guess that’s ok then,” she said grudgingly. The burrito was a mess now, a million pieces spread all over the plate. He’d only seen her take one bite.

“Jake called me today, said he wanted to get together.”

“Really?” he stood up and stuck his head into the fridge. He wasn’t really hungry but he didn’t want her to see the expression on his face.

“I told him it will cost him five hundred bucks.”

Toby grinned into the fruit salad leftovers, “Hm, seems fair. That’s about how much he owes you.”

“Yeah, except that I’ll never get the years of my life back. You wanna help me practice my Microbiology terminology?”

“Oh gosh!” he came out of the fridge with a piece of watermelon, “Do I? But unfortunately I need a shower. And to not be near anything that has the words biology and terminology in it.”

“There’s no reason to be mean. You could just say no.”

She dumped the barely eaten burrito into the trash. Toby went to do the same with the half eaten sandwich and she snatched it out of his hand, “Hey! I might want that.”

“You’re not gonna eat it.”

“I might!”

“Fine. I’m going to take a shower. If you get a sudden and unexplainable urge to do the dishes, please restrain yourself until I come out.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

His celebration was a quiet affair. Max, his sponsor, talked for a while, then Toby talked for a while. Even though he stressed out every time he had to 'share', he always found himself with plenty to say. Afterwards, everyone got a slice of his celebration cake and Toby switched his yellow key chain for a glow-in-the-dark one. Max presented him with the one year coin and with that, the meeting was over. He stuck around to help clean up, wishing Lilly could have driven down. She'd seemed more excited about the whole thing than he was. But he supposed that after watching her only brother quietly slipping away for years, him being clean was a pretty big deal to her too. He decided that he would mail her the coin. He liked the key chain better anyway.

"How's the new job going?"

Toby smiled to himself as he tucked the last folding chair away.

Max loved to say that he took the 'hands-off' approach with his sponsees, but the truth of the matter was that he followed each of them closely, like a mother hen watching her chicks.

"Fine. It's killing my shoulder but the pay's great."

"Did you call Mass Rehab?"

"Not yet. I wanna have a plan before I call, you know? I might wait until I can see a doctor too. I'm pretty sure something's off there behind my shoulder blade, and the more things I've got wrong with me, the better chances are that they're gonna give me a hand."

"Right. Good. Have you heard from what's-his-name?"

"Michael?" Toby said sweetly, "Nope, not a word. He's probably got a fresh twenty year old running his weed all over town."

Max grunted. Being a six foot two bear of a man, his grunts were somewhat epic.

"He'll get his due."

Toby doubted that very much but he let it go. Max was big on the whole 'what goes around, comes around' theory. Toby couldn't think that way. He'd done enough rotten things in the past that the idea of a payback was pretty scary. They tucked the last of the books away and shut the lights off.

Outside, the humidity had reached a point where even the trees seemed to slump over. Max grumbled about it as always but Toby couldn't join in. Once upon a time he would have been stuck in smoky, filthy apartment, listening to Michael bitch about the heat as if Toby was to blame for the weather. Would he ever get used to being free? He almost hoped not. There was something magical about walking out of a meeting with a clear head, having money in his pocket and knowing that he could go anywhere and do anything he wanted. He didn't have to go back to his apartment, he didn't even have to go to sleep. He had the entire weekend off; he was free as a bird.

"What are you grinning at?" Max grumbled.

"Life is awesome."

Max shook his head, "Man, to be young and silly."

Chapter 3

Nikola blinked at the dashboard, then glanced at his watch. Both showed five thirty in the afternoon. Exactly an hour and a half after he'd pulled into the driveway. Except that he'd only pulled in a few minutes ago. He shut the car off and got out quickly before it happened again. The living room curtain twitched and his heart beat sped up. Of course, Kerrin was watching. The old bat had nothing better to do than obsess over her twenty cats and watch Nikola. Fury spiked through him again, so familiar now, an old friend that never quite left. Underneath it, fear quivered as it always did. It was happening more and more often. Losing hours at a time, having no idea why or how to stop it. What if he drifted off and never came back? Would it be like dying?

She cornered him at the door.

"I need to talk to you."

He was sweating again. It was incredible how such a simple sentence, such a harmless formation of words could affect him. She was blocking the stairs, all two hundred pounds of her, the tie-dyed nightmare of her housedress hurting his eyes. The smell of cats was overpowering now. If she didn't move, he was going to be sick.

"Your rent is late."

His hands turned slick with sweat, "You need to talk to Anne."

"Anne isn't here."

Her tone was clear; there was an issue with money and this issue should be taken up with a man. Never mind that Anne had always been the one to handle the rent, never mind that Nikola had been handing his paychecks over in their entirety to Anne for the last four years.

He wasn't going to throw up. Scattered thoughts only flashed by, contributing nothing. The expression on the faces of Anne's parents when they found out that their daughter was dating a dishwasher. Anne on the phone, arguing with the credit card company. Her car leaking transmission fluid, the pile of coins she was saving for the laundromat, the bag of books she sold back to the bookstore.

"You need to talk to Anne."

"Oh, I'll talk to Anne all right. I've yet to see the other half of the electric bill too. And what happened to the bottle of laundry soap that was sitting on the stairs? I don't remember telling her that she can use it--"

"Move."

He thought that he would end up shouting at her. Throat constricted, all he managed was a hiss. He shook from head to toe now, his heart beating in his ears again, making it hard to hear. For the first time since he walked in, their eyes met.

Whatever she saw seemed to be enough. Mouth snapping shut, she moved out of the way.

There was shouting.

Nikola paced the hallway, counting the floor planks. Six, then seven, then six. The row of seven had two uneven ones, jaggedly cut and poorly fitted, the deep cracks in between them collecting dirt. They bothered him. It was a sore tooth, always there, impossible to ignore. Even worse than those planks were the cracks, like a picture that seemed to move out of the corner of the eye. They grew bigger when he wasn't looking. One of these days they would swallow him whole.

The door opened and he stopped. Anne stormed in, flung her bag down the hall, kicked the door shut with her heel. He flinched at the sound, pain shooting up his arm.

“Jesus Nik. Stop! Let go.”

He looked at her blankly, then looked down where her hand was latched around his wrist. Blood trickled down his arm. He’d dug his nails in so deep that his fingers were coated in it. He let her pull his hand back and saw that look in her eyes again. The same look she got when the heater broke down, when the car wouldn’t start, when the fridge was empty. The same look that had put those lines on her forehead.

The look he hated.

“You didn’t pay rent,” he said, surprised by how calm he sounded. He didn’t feel calm. He didn’t feel calm at all. She studied him for a moment, her face expressionless, then spread her arms, “You wanna hit me? Go right ahead.” He blinked at her. His hands were clenched into fists, every cord of muscle tight from his wrists to his shoulders. Something in his brain short circuited. It felt like a cold slap of water down his neck, like waking up in the car an hour and a half later and not knowing how he got there. He would never. Would he?

He shook his head, covered his face with his hands, bit the inside of his palm. Jesus. He was going crazy. He was going crazy.

“Come on,” she said, nudging him, “let’s clean that off.”

Once she was asleep he crawled out of the bed silently and curled up in the recliner by the window. Outside, black fingers crawled over the glass. They were only shadows of the tree branches, he knew that, he understood it in the part of his mind that still seemed to be functioning. It didn’t matter though. He had to close his eyes to make them go away. His arm burned and itched. Anne had washed it and soaked it in alcohol. Then she’d wrapped it tightly with a clean, white bandage.

It was getting worse. That much was clear. Seventeen years of walking the tightrope, of teetering on the edge, of surviving day by day, he was finally going crazy. He deserved it. He deserved all of it and more for being who and what he was, for being a coward, for being alive. But Jesus, he was so afraid. He’d almost hurt Anne. The tenuous bit of control that had held him tethered to sanity was now gone. It slipped away so quietly that he hadn’t even noticed it missing until it was too late. At least Anne knew him well enough to see it. What if it had been someone else? Someone who didn’t know him, someone he’d just met?

A hand extended in the rain, a flash of white teeth. So much joy contained in one person, reaching out to Nikola, inviting him.

He shuddered. Better to watch the black fingers creeping. Watch and not think.

Chapter 4

“Hey Liz, wait!”

He jogged easily across the parking lot. It was a miracle what a couple of lazy days could do.

She paused, the car door open, juggling her sweater, her bag, her cell phone and keys, the exasperated set of her mouth almost changing his mind. He took the sweater off her arm so she can drop the cell phone on the seat.

"Toby, honey, I'm exhausted. I hate Mondays. I have a doctor's appointment in an hour. What is it?"

"Oh," he felt like an ass, "I'm sorry. It's nothing really, not important."

She dropped in the drivers seat and shoved her purse in between the seats, "You've been hovering over me all day. What? Julie giving you trouble? Want me to tell her to cool it?"

"No. I mean, sure, that would be nice, but that's not what I wanted to ask. I was just... curious about someone who works here."

"Why does everyone think I know everything?"

Toby grinned, "Cause you do?"

She barked a short laugh, rubbing the bridge of her nose, "Cute. You're slick. I've got a few minutes I guess. Who are we talking about?"

"There's a guy, upstairs in the kitchen. He's tall, thin, kind of..." he paused looking for the right word.

"Weird?" Liz added.

"Yes. I guess so."

"His name is Nikola," she said, he tone somewhat careful, "what did he do?"

It seemed such an odd question that he paused for a minute. He recalled that look in the guy's eye, that moment when Toby had been afraid of him. He was one the verge of mentioning it, then changed his mind.

"Nothing. He didn't do anything, I was just curious about him."

"What did you hear? Did Julie say something? 'Cause that little snake is already a hair away from getting her teeth knocked in, I'm getting sick and tired of her shit."

"No, no, Julie didn't- nothing was said about anything. I haven't heard anything, I was just curious."

She studied him for a few moments as if wondering if he was lying. Toby wasn't sure what he'd expected but so far the conversation was far off anything he'd prepared for.

She sighed, "Ok, get in the car, I'm sick of craning my neck."

"He's from Bosnia. Ever heard of Bosnia?"

She blew out a lungful of smoke and he stopped himself from waving a hand in front of his face, "Yeah. There was a civil war there a while ago, right?"

"Back in the early nineties. I'm not sure how old Nikola was at the time. I think he's thirty now, so maybe thirteen? Fourteen? Pretty young to live through a war, but he lived through it. His entire family, parents, brother, sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles, they're all dead. He was hurt, or at least that's what I was told. I can't even imagine what he saw, what it must have done to him. From what I can see, he's got a serious case of PTSD and I don't think it's being treated. Three years ago, one of the male Aides came up behind him and did something, I don't even know what. I'm sure he thought he was being funny, but Nikola snapped. It took five of us to pull him off."

Toby felt as if she'd punched him in the stomach, "Jesus. What- what happened?"

“Roger was the kitchen manager back then, nice old guy, spent some time in ‘Nam. Had Nikola up in the office for a few hours. Don’t know what was said but Nikola came back down and apologized to the Aide. The kid looked pretty rough, bloody nose, two black eyes, swollen lip and all that. I can’t remember what the the hell his name was, something like Derrick or David, or some such shit. He wasn’t here that long anyway. A drifter, one of those that hop from a nursing home to a nursing home, thinking they’re gonna find one where they don’t have to work. He’d started off saying that he wanted to call the cops and get Nikola arrested but in the end he didn’t. Who knows why. I’m thinking Roger had a nice little talk with him too. Nikola got suspended for a week or two then came back to work as if nothing had happened.”

Toby found himself speechless.

Liz threw the rest of her cigarette out the window, “He’s not alone, you know. There’s a girl. Wife, girlfriend, something. They live together. I saw her last year dropping him off before he got that green Mercury over there. Pretty girl.”

His stomach twisted and he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She knew exactly what she was saying and why. He wanted to tell her that he didn’t believe that part, not even a little bit. The way the man had looked at him; it was not a look of a straight man, a man who has a girlfriend or a wife.

He said nothing though because he didn’t really know, did he? What did actually happen? A few fleeting moments, that was all. In those few moments, Toby had thought he’d seen something. Did he really see it?

Liz sighed, “You’re a sweet guy Toby, but in some ways, you’re still a kid.”

He most certainly was not! He was twenty four, working hard and paying his own way. Just because he’d made some bad decisions, it didn’t mean-

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch now,” she said with a small smile, “and don’t bother denying it either. I hope you never try playing poker with that face.”

Smile disappearing, she leaned in a little closer, as if to make sure that he had her full attention, “You like him. It’s so obvious you might as well put a sign on your forehead right now. My two cents on this probably mean nothing but if you have this idea that you can help, that you can ‘fix’ him, you’re more foolish than I think. There’s something wrong with Nikola. Something that’s been festering for a long time. Leave it alone. Find something else to waste your time on, something that won’t get you hurt. That’s my advice. Now get out of my car, I’m gonna be late.”

Chapter 5

It was raining again. Nikola stood in it for a while, face turned up to the clouds. It was no use. There was no joy in it, none that he could find.

He lit a cigarette in the shed, leaning against the stacks of lawn chairs. With the shed door open he didn’t have to see the building. Just the driveway, the ocean, and the overcast sky. It felt like standing at the edge of the world, being able to step off and disappear forever. The roof amplified the rain drops, a million little taps against a tin

drum. His lungs expanded, taking in the scent of the damp earth and salt. A few milliseconds of peace. A few milliseconds of being numb, of not thinking about anything.

The sliding door opened and closed. He froze, every muscle on alert. Dropped the cigarette and ground it with his heel. Long, anxious moments passed. The shed was off limits to smokers; always had been although no one had ever stopped him from using it. Would today be the day? Could he handle a confrontation? Only twenty four hours ago he would have said yes, he was capable of staying calm. Capable of walking away. Except that now he knew that to be a joke. He didn't really know what he was capable of, did he? As if on command, the scars on his still tightly wrapped arm started to itch and burn.

A figure darkened the shed doorway and stepped inside. Then stopped, blue eyes widening in the gloom, "I'm sorry. I didn't know someone was in here."

Nikola couldn't move. There was another scent in the shed now, a clean smell of river moss and sun baked grass. It wrapped around him tightly until he could taste it in the back of his throat. Where had the air gone? Suddenly it became impossible to inhale. Dark eyelashes lowered and Nikola's stomach dropped with them. There was nothing soft about the line of the jaw, the unlined forehead, the strong nose. Nothing soft anywhere but it all seemed to yield under Nikola's gaze. Color crept up the curve of the neck, bloomed across the cheeks. Nikola shivered watching it spread.

"I didn't mean to... I'm gonna go."

"Wait."

It sounded like someone else's voice despite coming from his own throat. He took a step closer. Somewhere in the back of his mind dusty alarms were sounding, warning lights were flashing, but it was all so far away and unimportant. It was like stepping closer to the sun. A rain drop slid down a temple, hovered on the edge of the jaw and settled on a shoulder, a dark stain on the snow white material. An amber strand had escaped the confining braid; it curled around an ear, a stark contrast to the skin. Nikola could hear a breath now, faster than his own. Something trembled in the hollow of the pale throat, trembled inside of Nikola's chest, inside of his stomach. The sun did not have warmth like this; the sun paled in comparison. Eyelashes lifted, black wings rising over the sea. Now the blue was just a thin line surrounding the shaded pools in the middle. Were they giving him a permission? Nikola didn't know or care.

Hot breath brushed his lips. Under his palm, the underside of the jaw was soft and tender, the pulse fluttering wildly. A small sound left the parted lips, a whimper stopped at the last moment. It struck Nikola like a lash, sharp and hot and painful. His fingers tangled in the damp hair.

Lips met his, tasting of a childhood spring. Early morning dew glowing on the fields of wheat. Mist rising from the freshly turned earth. Sweet and forgotten. Then he was drowning in the wet heat, slick tongue, mouth surrendering to his. A series of shocks slammed into his spine, lightening fast. Blood roared in his ears.

Hands gripped his waist and with that simple contact he was back in his body, cramped in a shell of a stranger. Even with a layer of a cotton shirt in between those hands and his skin, his scars seemed to sting at the contact. His stomach turned. And still, it took a lifetime to pull away. Like tearing off a strip of skin. He wanted to rebel at the unfairness of it. Here was something he wanted. When was the last time he'd wanted anything but death?

A startled sound followed his abrupt withdrawal. No words followed it as he raced out of the shed and back inside of the building. His mouth burned. His mind howled. He couldn't make himself look back.

He didn't even think of Anne until he was halfway home. Amidst the startled sounds of car horns, he jerked the wheel viciously to the side of the road and managed to open the door just in time. He dry heaved until his stomach begged for relief. Anne. Spreading her arms, asking if he wanted to hit her. Her lips brushing the top of his head. Wrapping the bandage around his ravaged arm. Anne. It was too much.

He parked in the back of the building. A row of motorcycles occupied most of the space, the chrome glinting in the afternoon sun. The gravel crunched under his sneakers still damp from the rain. The heavy clouds had moved; the sun lit them on fire, adding pain to their anger. The circle of smokers by the back door conversed silently. No one looked at him.

He settled in one of the bar stools, far away from the few early birds.

"Whatill'it be."

"Jack. Straight."

Sometime later, ages later, a lifetime away, a hand touched his elbow, "Hey stranger. Buy you the next round?" The world floated. Sharp edges? Nikola couldn't remember what those felt like. Someone had slipped some money into the ancient jukebox and Willie Nelson blared through the speakers. Nikola chuckled; it was a bloody mary morning indeed. His foot tapped to the beat of its own accord, the drum beat pulsing in his stomach. Smoke rose above the pool tables. Someone shouted, someone laughed, a bottle shattered. A current traveled over his skin from the touch. Everything tilted slightly as he turned to the voice. Black.

Black eyes, black hair, black button up shirt. Scruffy beard, wide smile. The cotton straining across the shoulders, the arms dusted with black hair, a fading tattoo of an eagle on the forearm. Jeans so faded that they looked white in the gloom. A cowboy boot resting lazily on the bottom rung of the stool. Nikola's stool. Close enough to touch.

Denim stretched tight across the thigh.

A deep, raspy voice of a smoker, "How 'bout it?"

"Yes," Nikola exhaled, "God, yes."

His back struck the door. Heavy belt scarping against his stomach; stench of beer, whiskey, cigarettes and sweat. A tongue invading his mouth, the beard bruising the skin of his lips, his cheek. Calloused hands under his shirt, digging into his flesh. Music thrumming through the floorboards, drowning out the sound of the belt being loosened, the zippers going down. A hand latched on to his wrist, spun him. He struck the door again, this time with his front. Oh, the pain. It tore through him, a hot poker searing through his midsection, his back. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out. His mouth filled with blood. Arms wrapped around him, trapping him. Teeth sunk into his neck. The beautiful pain.

“Harder,” he heard himself beg, “harder.”

A rough push and he was down, skinning both knees. Fingers tangled in his hair, forced his cheek against the floor. A ray of light drifted from the cracks under the door. Dust motes danced merrily in front of his face. It would rip him in half, it would kill him, it would shred him into millions of pieces. The beautiful pain. With each thrust it grew, his cheekbone grating against the wood. There was sound of an animal mewling in agony, but it was somewhere far, far away. A hand tasting of sweat and sex closed over his mouth. The rhythm increased, a fury causing a crescendo of hurt. He screamed into the hand and the light flickered out.